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SPOTLIGHT

Tale spinners and barnstormers

Author Richard Ford highlights 10-day Festival of the Arts Boca

By Phillip Valys
STAFF WRITER

Richard Ford opens his new novel, "Let Me Be Frank With You," in the thick of two hurricanes. The first, Hurricane Sandy, has just devastated the Jersey Shore, where, he writes, "civic life has sustained a fierce whacking — house roofs sheared off, exterior walls stripped away [...] a carpet of ocean and beach sand has been driven up onto the streets and yards, as if the Shore in a single night had turned into Riyadh." The second hurricane rages on inside Frank Bascombe, the angsty character Ford has written about in four novels and counting, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning "Independence Day." Frank, a 68-year-old retiree, stumbles through Sandy's aftermath (he literally slips on the sand), sharply meditative about his life's experiences but clueless about their meaning.

Ford, unlike Frank, is plenty aware of the tragedy that follows a hurricane. After Katrina, he relocated to New Orleans (his occasional home) to rebuild homes with a local church, the "only church-going duty of my adult life." Ford, like Frank, visited the Jersey Shore after Sandy, which inspired the four overlapping stories of loss and suffering that became "Let Me Be Frank With You."

"My wife, Kristina, and I went down there, not just as concerned citizens, but because I have an opportunity to witness one of those 'civic whackings,'" says Ford, who will appear Sunday at Festival of the Arts Boca. "What happens to people's houses and lives when these big, natural calamities occur? But then, I started thinking in terms of Frank Bascombe sentences, and I realized: Frank's voice, his wryness, seems natural because he has a voice attuned to New Jersey."

Ford spent a day this week "liberating" his Maine house from piles of snow, so he'll be looking forward to South Florida sunshine



FESTIVAL OF THE ARTS BOCA/COURTESY

Daniil Simkin is one of the International Stars of Ballet, set to perform Sunday at the ninth Festival of the Arts Boca.

this weekend. Frank's ruminations on aging should appeal to "South Florida's retirees," he says. His audience will also, of course, be "well acquainted" with hurricanes.

"Frank's mechanism is to actively compare his experiences with the tragedies of others, and to find hilarity in it," Ford, 71, says. "There's the old Borscht Belt axiom: 'If nothing's funny, nothing's serious.' Actually, you have a lot of Borscht Belt people living down there, so they will probably enjoy that line."

The ninth edition of top-draw authors, ballet dancers and musicians will file in under the white tent March 6-15 at Mizner Park Amphitheater, with a bill topped by

married banjo adventurers Bela Fleck and Abigail Washburn. Also appearing is Irish flutist (and "Lord of the Rings" soundtrack contributor) Sir James Galway, set to perform orchestra selections during a March 13 Mozart Gala alongside pianist Conrad Tao, Itzhak Perlman protégé violinist Arnaud Sussmann and conductor Constantine Kitsooulos, the festival's music director.

Following are four more things to watch, learn and do at Festival of the Arts Boca.

"West Side Story:" On Friday, at Mizner Park Amphitheater, festival director Charlie Siemon says Jamie Bernstein, daughter of Leonard, will sit in for a remastered public

Festival of the Arts Boca

When: Friday through March 15:

7:30 p.m. Friday "West Side Story," (film and orchestra)

3 p.m. Saturday "Girl Rising," (documentary)

7:30 p.m. Saturday Bela Fleck and Abigail Washburn

4 p.m. Sunday Richard Ford

7 p.m. Sunday Stars of International Ballet

7 p.m. Monday Siddhartha Mukherjee

7 p.m. Tuesday Clive Thompson

7 p.m. Wednesday Thomas Friedman

7 p.m. Thursday Michael Grunwald

7:30 p.m. March 13 Mozart Gala

4 p.m. March 14 Lucinda Franks

7:30 p.m. March 14 Young People's Chorus of New York City

4 p.m. March 15 Martin Goldsmith

Where: Mizner Park Cultural Arts Center, 201 Plaza Real, and Mizner Park Amphitheatre, 501 Plaza Real, in Boca Raton

Cost: \$15-\$125 per event; \$152-\$244 for all-authors pass; \$412-\$684 for festival pass

Contact: 561-368-8445 or FestivalOfTheArtsBoca.org

that Bernstein composed it, and became known for it, and that Sondheim did the lyrics long before he was famous."

Bela Fleck and Abigail Washburn: Ten-time Grammy-winning Bela Fleck, founder of bluegrass band New Grass Revival, will join his banjoist wife, Abigail Washburn, for an evening of speedy plucking Saturday, at the amphitheater.

The duo are promoting a new self-titled album, their first, a high-energy blend of jazz-, funk- and worldbeat-inspired Americana that includes a gentle turn at the folk warhorse "I've Been Working on the Railroad."

"They're exceptional artists, and like Chick Corea in previous years, we've always been attracted to singular performers that can knock it out of the park," Siemon says.

Authors and speakers: The festival is more author-rich than usual, Siemon says, with six Pulitzer winners decorating the lineup of speakers appearing at the amphitheater-adjacent Mizner Park Cultural Arts Center. Those include Ford; researcher and physician Siddhartha Mukherjee; Time magazine correspondent Michael Grunwald; memoirist Lucinda Franks; and NPR radio host Martin Goldsmith. New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman will appear at the amphitheater.

"This year, we got particularly lucky with the authors. It doesn't hurt that the weather is seasonably warm and everywhere else, it's still a damn blizzard," Siemon says. "We've been pulling back on concerts during the week and replacing them with authors."

Parking: The festival is partnering this year with the Delray Beach Downtowner, an electric-powered-carts company, to give free rides to festivalgoers. The tips-only service will pick up passengers at Boca Raton City Hall, 201 W. Palmetto Park Road, between 6 p.m. and one hour after the event ends, Siemon says.

Visitors can also use the metered street parking (\$6 per car) or four free garages in Mizner Park. A 15-passenger shuttle will offer free rides to anyone parked in the garage behind the One City Centre building, 1 N. Federal Highway.